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ABSTRACT

This brief information sheet summarizes the types of social-emotional problems common among gifted children and suggests preventive actions schools can take. A table lists problems associated with characteristic strengths of gifted children. Specific problems briefly addressed include: uneven development, peer relations, excessive self-criticism, perfectionism, avoidance of risk-taking, multipotentiality, the presence of disabilities, difficulties adjusting to the school culture and norms, relating to expectations of others, depression, and problems in peer and family relations. Educators are urged to: (1) reach out to parents, (2) focus on parents of young children, (3) educate and involve health care and other professionals, use educational flexibility, and establish parent discussion groups. (Contains 13 references.) (DB)

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NURTURING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTED CHILDREN

James T. Webb

What Are the Social-Emotional Needs of Gifted Children?

To a large degree, the needs of gifted children are the same as those of other children. The same developmental stages occur, though often at a younger age (Webb & Kleine, 1993). Gifted children may face the same potentially limiting problems, such as family poverty, substance abuse, or alcoholism. Some needs and problems, however, appear more often among gifted children.

Types of Problems

It is helpful to conceptualize needs of gifted children in terms of those that arise because of the interaction with the environmental setting (e.g., family, school, or cultural milieu) and those that arise internally because of the very characteristics of the gifted child.

Several intellectual and personality attributes characterize gifted children and should be noted at the outset. These characteristics may be strengths, but potential problems also may be associated with them (Clark, 1992; Seagoe, 1974). Some particularly common characteristics are shown in the table.

These characteristics are seldom inherently problematic by themselves. More often, combinations of these characteristics lead to behavior patterns such as:

Uneven Development. Motor skills, especially fine-motor, often lag behind cognitive conceptual abilities, particularly in preschool gifted children (Webb & Kleine, 1993). These children may see in their "mind's eye" what they want to do, construct, or draw; however, motor skills do not allow them to achieve the goal. Intense frustration and emotional outbursts may result.

Peer Relations. As preschoolers and in primary grades, gifted children (particularly highly gifted) attempt to organize people and things. Their search for consistency emphasizes "rules," which they attempt to apply to others. They invent complex games and try to organize their playmates, often prompting resentment in their peers.

Excessive Self-Criticism. The ability to see possibilities and alternatives may imply that youngsters see idealistic images of what they might be, and simultaneously berate themselves because they see how they are falling short of an ideal (Adderholt-Elliott, 1989; Powell & Haden, 1984; Whitmore, 1980).

Perfectionism. The ability to see how one might ideally perform, combined with emotional intensity, leads many gifted children to unrealistically high expectations of themselves. In high ability children, perhaps 15-20% may be hindered significantly by perfectionism at some point in their academic careers, and even later in life.

Avoidance of Risk-Taking. In the same way the gifted youngsters see the possibilities, they also see potential problems in undertaking those activities. Avoidance of potential problems can mean avoidance of risk-taking, and may result in underachievement (Whitmore, 1980).

POSSIBLE PROBLEMS THAT MAY BE ASSOCIATED WITH CHARACTERISTIC STRENGTHS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

Strengths	*Possible Problems*
Acquires/retains information quickly.	Impatient with others; dislikes basic routine.
Inquisitive; searches for significance.	Asks embarrassing questions; excessive in interests.
Intrinsic motivation.	Strong-willed; resists direction.
Enjoys problem-solving; able to conceptualize, abstract, synthesize.	Resists routine practice; questions teaching procedures.
Seeks cause-effect relations.	Dislikes unclear/illogical areas (e.g., traditions or feelings).
Emphasizes truth, equity, and fair play.	Worries about humanitarian concerns.
Seeks to organize things and people.	Constructs complicated rules; often seen as bossy.
Large facile vocabulary; advanced, broad information.	May use words to manipulate; bored with school and age-peers.
High expectations of self and others.	Intolerant, perfectionistic; may become depressed.
Creative/inventive; likes new ways of doing things.	May be seen as disruptive and out of step.
Intense concentration; long attention span and persistence in areas of interest.	Neglects duties or people during periods of focus; resists interruption; stubbornness.
Sensitivity, empathy; desire to be accepted by others.	Sensitivity to criticism or peer rejection.
High energy, alertness, eagerness.	Frustration with inactivity; may be seen as hyperactive.
Independent; prefers individualized work; reliant on self.	May reject parent or peer input; nonconformity.
Diverse interests and ities; versatility.	May appear disorganized or scatabiltered; frustrated over lack of time.
Strong sense of humor.	Peers may misunderstand humor; may become "class clown" for attention.

Adapted from Clark (1992) and Seagoe (1974).

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Muitipotentiality. Gifted children often have several advanced capabilities and may be involved in diverse activities to an almost frantic degree. Though seldom a problem for the child, this may create problems for the family, as well as quandaries when decisions must be about career selection (Kerr, 1985; 1991).

Gifted Children with Disabilities. Physical disabilities can prompt social and emotional difficulties. Intellect may be high, but motor difficulties such as cerebral palsy may prevent expression of potential. Visual or hearing impairment or a learning disability may cause frustration. Gifted children with disabilities tend to evaluate themselves more on what they are unable to do than on their substantial abilities (Whitmore & Maker, 1985).

Problems From Outside Sources

Lack of understanding or support for gifted children, and sometimes actual ambivalence or hostility, creates significant problems (Webb & Kleine, 1993). Some common problem patterns are:

School Culture and Norms. Gifted children, by definition, are "unusual" when compared with same-age children—at least in cognitive abilities—and require different educational experiences (Kleine & Webb, 1992). Schools, however, generally group children by age. The child often has a dilemma—conform to the expectations for the average child or be seen as nonconformist.

Expectations by Others. Gifted children—particularly the more creative—do not conform. Nonconformists violate or challenge traditions, rituals, roles, or expectations. Such behaviors often prompt discomfort in others. The gifted child, sensitive to others' discomfort, may then try to hide abilities.

Peer Relations. Who is a peer for a gifted child? Gifted children need several peer groups because their interests are so varied. Their advanced levels of ability may steer them toward older children. They may choose peers by reading books (Halsted, 1994). Such children are often thought of as "loners." The conflict between fitting in and being an individual may be quite stressful.

Depression. Depression is usually being angry at oneself or at a situation over which one has little or no control. In some families, continual evaluation and criticism of performance—one's own and others—is a tradition. Any natural tendency to self-evaluate likely will be inflated. Depression and academic underachievement may be increased.

Sometimes educational misplacement causes the gifted youngster to feel caught in a slow motion world. Depression may result because the child feels caught in an unchangeable situation.

Family Relations. Families particularly influence the development of social and emotional competence. When problems occur, it is not because parents consciously decide to create difficulties for gifted children. It is because parents lack information about gifted children, or lack support for appropriate parenting, or are attempting to cope with their own unresolved problems (which may stem from their experiences with being gifted).

Preventing Problems

Reach out to Parents. Parents are particularly important in preventing social or emotional problems. Teaching, no matter how excellent or supportive, can seldom counteract inappropriate parenting. Supportive family environments, on the other hand, can counteract unhappy school experiences. Parents need information if they are to nurture well and to be wise advocates for their children.

Focus on Parents of Young Children. Problems are best prevented by involving parents when children are young. Parents particularly must understand characteristics that may make gifted children seem different or difficult.

Educate and Involve Health-Care and Other Professionals. Concentrated efforts should be made to involve such professionals in state and local meetings and in continuing education programs concerning gifted children. Pediatricians, psychologists, and other caregivers such as day-care providers typically have received little training about gifted children, and therefore can provide little assistance to parents (Webb & Kleine, 1993).

Use Educational Flexibility. Gifted children require different and more flexible educational experiences. When the children come from multicultural or low-income families, educational flexibility and reaching out may be particularly necessary. Seven flexibly paced educational options, relatively easy to implement in most school settings (Cox, Daniel & Boston, 1985) are: early entrance; grade skipping; advanced level courses; compacted courses; continuous progress in the regular classroom; concurrent enrollment in advanced classes; and credit by examination. These options are based on competence and demonstrated ability, rather than on arbitrary age groupings.

Establish Parent Discussion Groups. Parents of gifted children typically have few opportunities to talk with other parents of gifted children. Discussion groups provide opportunities to "swap parenting recipes" and child-rearing experiences. Such experiences provide perspective as well as specific information (Webb & DeVries, 1993).

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